CHAPTER XI: CULTURE CHANGE IN RURAL OKINAWA

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Within a span of less than fifty years Okinawa has been twice subjected to periods of accelerated culture change. The first began in 1899 when the Japanese administration abolished the system of communal land ownership and taxation then extant in the rural areas and introduced private ownership. Land reform was followed by modernization of the government and the establishment of compulsory education. A second period of rapid change began in World War II with the American invasion and the establishment of military government.

The Japanese Impact (1879-1945) During the first twenty years of Japanese administration relatively few changes were introduced, but beginning with the land reform of 1899-1903 there followed a series of changes which completely altered the fabric of Okinawan society. The policies of the Japanese administration and the results of the long period of close contact with Japanese culture effected the conversion of Okinawans into Japanese nationals, destruction of the self-sufficiency of the rural village, modernization of government, weakening of the kin group, and greater participation in national life.

The transformation of Okinawans into Japanese nationals was accomplished through the establishment of a national school system which indoctrinated the students with the language and culture of Japan. Official Japanese policy aimed at the eradication of Okinawan culture; this was carried out through the schools and by means of repressive laws, police measures, and the practice of discrediting things Okinawan. Although there was some Okinawan reaction to this discrimination, the government was ultimately successful in creating a favorable response to Japanese culture. Its accomplishment was largely due to the close affinity of the Japanese and Okinawans. The linguistic and cultural resemblances between the two are so close as to make their differences bridgeable. A wider gulf might have produced antipathy, but instead the superior civilization of the Japanese came to be regarded as worthy of emulation.

The Japanese did discriminate against Okinawan culture, but as an alternative they offered, in theory at least, equal participation in their own culture. The process of assimilation was greatly facilitated by the cultural indoctrination of the schools; each successive generation came to feel and act more Japanese than the previous one. Okinawan culture was not eradicated, as the space of time was too short, but its creativity was reduced. An important factor in aiding the acceptance of Japanese culture was that the ideas and technology of the modern world came to Okinawa through Japan; hence, much of what was of foreign origin was accepted by the Okinawans as Japanese.

An important aspect of the change which came about under the Japanese administration was the realization for the average individual of a greater participation in the social and political life of the country. The mental

The mental isolation of the farm village gradually decreased under a national system of education, but the process did not end with schooling. Upon graduating, the youth, male and female, were enrolled in a national young people's association. Later the young men were drafted for service in the national army, and following discharge the veteran was enlisted in a local reserve association which met frequently for military and social purposes. When a man married, established a separate house, and began farming, membership in the farmer's association was automatically conferred. His wife upon marriage transferred from the young women's association to the women's association. There were, in fact, a variety of national organizations covering the various phases and roles of the individual's life; membership was never a matter of choice, but a thing automatically conferred. A stress on patriotism was a strong concomitant in all of these. Membership gave to the individual a sense of participating in a national society extending far beyond the limits of his small village.

It should be stressed that most Okinawans regard the Japanese as providers of modern, enlightened government. The Japanese administration abolished the old class divisions and freed the peasant from his serf-like status. Taxes on arable land were substantially reduced, and the villager for the first time was given some voice in government above the village level. Modern law courts were introduced and justice was administered impartially, not on a class basis as was formerly done.

Inadvertently, perhaps, official Japanese policy did much to destroy the self-sufficiency of the farm village. Prior to the land reform, sugar production did not exceed local needs, but government encouragement and subsidy so increased production that by the time of World War II it exceeded consumption by 900%. This resulted in a food shortage which necessitated heavy importations of basic cereals to compensate.

Japanese manufactured goods also contributed to the decline in self-sufficiency. Factory-made cloth gradually displaced home-woven fabrics, and accordingly cotton and fiber banana were no longer raised. The tools, utensils, and machines of the factory slowly replaced the simpler devices used in the village.

Abolition of the system of communal land tenure contributed to a weakening of the family and particularly of the large extended kin group. The introduction of private property and Japanese laws of inheritance served to create a landless element which often emigrated from Okinawa in search of land or jobs elsewhere. Where formerly the kin group had clustered in certain localities, they now became dispersed over great areas, making continued interaction difficult and often impossible.

Sixty-six years of Japanese rule resulted in a fairly successful amalgamation of Okinawa into the Japanese state; though the Okinawan language and culture were not destroyed, they were severely altered.

Impact of World War II and the American Occupation The war destroyed virtually all of rural and urban Okinawa, and resulted in the death of twenty percent of the population.

factors have made possible its resilience. Though the island is small, the Americans and Okinawans tend to be concentrated in their own areas, and the rate of interaction is not so high as mere figures might indicate. Secondly, Okinawan culture is fairly homogeneous, hence unaffected areas tend to sustain other areas which might be disturbed. Thirdly, there remains a strong awareness of cultural identity, much of which is fostered by language, song, theater, dance, and religion. Fourthly, there exists a sense of belonging to a larger national entity, Japan; consequently, there is less feeling of being alone. Fifthly, despite some changes, much the same sort of educational and political systems operate today as before the war; this has provided a considerable degree of continuity. Lastly, the present administration has not been culturally repressive.